

## MEDIA ARCHAEOLOGY AS METHOD OF RE/SEARCH IN PARALLEL LINES (MEDIA ART, ACADEMIC MEDIA THEORY)

[Rough notes of a statement on occasion of the panel discussion "Search for a method" with Inke Arns, Wolfgang Ernst, Jussi Parikka and Siegfried Zielinski, conceived and moderated by Timothy Druckrey as part of the *transmediale.12* "In/compatible" symposium, February 5, 2012, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin]

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### **In/compatible? Media Art and academic research**

Please do not expect theoretical comments on works of art here from my side. My verbal language can not aptly describe the electronic circuitry and the algorithms which are at work there.

This statement will be about in/compatibilities: between artistic media aesthetics and academic media theories, between media archaeology and technological nostalgia.

Media artists have a "radar system" (McLuhan) for the detection of new trends in techno-aesthetics themselves, rather parallel than directly dependent on academic discourse. Both develop in independent ways.

It would be just a dream to assume that media theories have a direct impact on artistic production - except a few cases like Marshall McLuhan, Vilém Flusser and Friedrich Kittler. New methods are rather *induced* by the very denominator which is shared by media art as well as by media theory: media themselves.

Let us put emphasis on the differences ("in/compatibilities") rather than the happy alliance between media art and academic research. Both practices are co-existent; both methods converge: the art of academic research on the one hand, "research art" on the other. Both open media-theoretical insight.

### **Re/search as method**

Let me start with a comment on the working title of our panel discussion. All over the current *transmediale.12*, we can notice that a conceptual awareness of material and informational disruptions within the so-called digital culture is vibrantly present. In fact, media archaeology is not afraid of such media-epistemic discontinuities and does not smooth them in favor of soft variations.

Apparently, neither academic media theory nor media artists have to search for a new method, they have already found it by what media archaeology by its very name declares as its essential method: re/search, that is: dis-covering what has been already there, but more or less hidden or subliminal. Different from the

utopian visions which have dominated the first generation of media art, precise re/research corresponds with the literal meaning of the Latin term *inventio*: that every invention is as well a re-invention (in German: *Wied/Erfindung*), undiscovering the "always-already-there".

For example, the Berlin-based media artist Jan-Peter Sonntag together with an advanced master student of media at Humboldt University, Sebastian Döring, will soon perform (tentatively in public, in the Baroque tradition of the *theatrum anatomicum*) a qualified anatomy of late Friedrich Kittler's self-built electronic music synthesizer. This will not be a destruction of the artefact but its un-covering, a literal de/construction, unearthing knowledge about the machine and its author at the same time - material hermeneutics.

A student of Media Studies (Master curriculum), Christian Schliebs, installed of a viable three-dimensional *camera obscura* in a gallery room (Sur la Montagne, Torstrasse) at Berlin, called *SlaMera Obscura* (July 9/10, 2011). If Schliebs' knowledge and epistemological awareness (such as Platon's cave metaphor) of the camera obscura may have been a direct result of his university courses he attended to, the actual art installation leads to insights which are not primarily based on academic speech and the printed text but on the physical experience - true "media theatre". The artistic installation explicitly served as a critical question addressed at the generation of Youtube-based *digital natives*<sup>1</sup>. The project report by Schliebs, though, takes the classical form of the textual argument. Academic media theory brings out the epistemological surplus which is dormant within media technologies; knowledge needs to become explicit in order to become reflective, and this primarily takes place in the medium of verbal text - the classical cultural technology as practiced in universities. Different from that logocentric explication of knowledge, there is *implicit* knowledge (Polyani) which stays in a kind of latency (very archaeological) within the media; artistic practice can evoke this implicit *epistémé* to create affective forms of *insight*. But both academics and artists must be "tuned" in the right way (frequencies) to be able to "resonate" with that knowledge.

By interfacing art & science, let us not look for a harmonic alliance, but work out the differences - the in/compatibilities. The commercial industry of human-machine interfaces tends to erase the human/machine difference by creating the illusion of an immediate "dialogue"; let us rather learn from the differences.

The new "method" is not restricted to academic or artistic research, but is performed by recursive machines themselves. An example is the Mandelbrot fractals which all of the sudden showed on the computer screen the *Gestalt* iterations which could never have been discovered by endless lines of calculation in symbols on paper by human mathematicians. In case of sound, sonographic software is able to analyze acoustic articulation in ways which symbolic music notation (the score) never could do. Another case: The *Detectors* as developed by Shintaro Miyazaki and Martin Howse sonify the hidden electromagnetic rhythms which surround us in

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<sup>1</sup> Project report *SlaMera Obscura. Ein begehbares Lochkamerakino* (January 6, 2012) by Christian Schliebs, referring to a notion coined by Marc Prensky

everyday electronic devices, thus revealing the algo-rhythmical, even musical character of internal micro-processor activity.

Such practice has been present in *Weise7: the in/compatible laboratorium* located at the *transmediale12* venue in Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin.

### **A new kind of media historiography?**

Media archaeology is not aiming at a new history, not even at new "stories". Media archaeology does not narrate, because machines do not tell stories, they count. Algorithmics precedes narration.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, Jean-Luc Godard chose to change his medium from writing to video editing when creating his *Histoire(s) du Cinema* as an artistic attempt of media archaeography in a non-textual way. And Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of knowledge* has not just been another method in how to conceive the history of culture and technology, but more challenging, it still is a vibrant chronopoetics, an alternative to the discourse of history itself. Media historiography and media archaeology, to a certain extent, are in/compatible in the most productive way; they are fundamentally different approaches to the temporal layers of technological media and their human condition.

Manuel DeLanda imagines a future "robot historian" to write the retrospective archaeology of current media culture; in fact, it is essential to media archaeology as method to take (or simulate) the techno-mathematical point of view of the media themselves. Media archaeology as academic method is performed by humans; but there are cases where the media themselves all of the sudden actively become the archeologists of past signals and data, be it numerical, texts, acoustic or optical.

When Samuel Beckett's one-act drama *Krapp's Last Tape* was performed in 1959 on the theatre stage, the main protagonist was a magnetic tape machine re-playing the human actor's voice from years ago - veritable "media theatre". That leads to non-metaphorical acoustic research, an archaeology of the voice as performed by the technical medium of recording and re-play itself.

While conventional media historiography as symbolic organization of cultural time tends to privilege linear stories of the type "from abacus to computer", let us instead diagrammatically imagine non-linearities and anachronistic re/turns. The so-called "digital" does not simply emerge after analogue, that is: signal recording media like the phonograph or wireless radio but has been there already: in telegraphy with dots and dashes, and above all, with alphabetic writing.

In April 2012 the chair of Media Theories at Humboldt University will organize a workshop on the archaeology and future becomings of the analogue computer. Analogue computing is not just a dead end in the history of calculating machines, but the method of "thinking analogue" remains a genuine alternative to algorithmic numerical data processing. A Dutch music composer, Hans Kulk, will demonstrate how to generate music on an analogue computer, thus

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2 Lev Manovich, in: *The Language of New Media*, notably differentiates databanks from narrative.

reminding of the sisterhood of analog computer and musical synthesizer (his composition *North-West*, December 2002).

Academic methods remind us that the media-artistic impulse is not just a passive product of the current media sphere (or "media ecology", as expressed by Marshall McLuhan), but actively assists in dis-continuing former practices which hinder us to think the new ones. Programming video streams is different from recording electronic images; algorithmic art is different from the direct manipulation of matter, and new media temporalities create a chronosphere of its own, not exclusively subjected to the contextual time of discourse in which they are embedded. Video artists like Nam June Paik have articulated media temporality and materiality, transcending simply time-based performances (like theatre) towards an archaeology of time-critical processes, i. e. media practices where micro-temporal action is decisive for the success of the event at all.

Both in artistic and academic media archaeology the temporal dimensions and recursions of technologies has been a growing subject. The time axis manipulation in the media installation *The Invisible Shapes of Things Past* (1995-2007) by Joachim Sauter / Dirk Lüsebrink (Art + Com, Berlin) spatializes the time-based sequence of cinematic frames into sculptures of movement, making *The Shape of Time* (George Kubler) actually tangible.

### **Media archaeology as method a) in academic research, b) in artistic practice and c) as active media operations**

To avoid misunderstandings: Media archaeology is not just a metaphor for digging out material knowledge of technologies past, and it can not be reduced to unearthing "dead media" as once described by Bruce Sterling - although this in fact is one of its driving components. Once I have kindly been asked to contribute to *A Collection of many PROBLEMS. Extracted out of the Ancient and Modern Philosophers: As, SECRETS and EXPERIMENTS in Informaticks, Geometry, <...> Whereunto is added, DEAD MEDIA*, edited by Garnet Hertz (Edition Two, Telharmonium Press, California, 2010). In fact I sent a segment of metal "recording wire" which once was used for electromagnetic sound recording, a kind of mnemonic hair once wound around a reel. But the media-archaeological point is not in the artefact itself but in its operative coupling with the "field" it needs to be literally embedded in. A stripe of punched Morse code (which I found inserted in a previous edition of this *Collection*) might now actually be re-inserted into a reading mechanism which can decipher the latent message. The piece of wire most probably magnetically stores a voice or piece of music recorded decades ago; when inserted into a working Wire Recorder (re-activated, maybe, from a technical museum or from the Media Archaeological Fund at Humboldt University), one might all of the sudden perceive voices from bodies which probably have passed away already. This experience is not about dead media, but about media as being undead - a latency waiting to be processually activated. There is an untimeliness of media which is incorporated here.

When simply exhibited in a museum, an old Edison phonograph is dead matter indeed, a cultural artefact but not a medium. Once an Edison cylinder is played on it, Enrico Caruso's voice might be

heard, however noisy. Only when in operation a technical device is really in its medium state, a "medium in being" (parallel to the British navy expression of ships in military operation, a "fleet in being"<sup>3</sup>), and then something radically present takes place. Media-immediacy is ahistorical by its signal processing (and human perceptual) nature. Watching an old analog video from Paik's days makes us phenomenologically experience radical presence - which is the affective power of such media.

On 1st of February, 2012, German Deutschlandfunk radio announced that the voice of the German chancellor Otto von Bismarck has been re-discovered - from and as medium. In fact, different from the early morning newspaper report on this discovery, the medium radio could actually perform what it talks about and re-play the Bismarck voice file.<sup>4</sup> The radio commentator remarked on the signal-to-noise ratio of this record: "Das Lauschen und Rattern der Tonwalze ist lauter als das, was der Reichskanzler sagt." The material glitch here is the message - signalling the media tempor(e)ality of non-historical voice memory.

### **The a posteriori of media art?**

For sure, technological media are in the most direct way products of human culture. But as already noticed by McLuhan (referring to Samuel Butlers science fiction novel *Erewhon*), machines have emancipated in the meantime. Man lags behind; implicit media knowledge is ahead of a current user practice. That is why the "content" of a new medium is always simply the previous one. As indicated by Günther Anders in his book on *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* which carries the archaeological moment in its title: Humans are belated when compared with the possibilities dormant within technological products (the inverse media archaeological potential). Is art, since the age of technological reproduction, lagging behind, when media themselves become the agency of artistic production so that the artist is just the "shepherd" of his technological objects (*Objekthirte*, as expressed by Anders)?

I therefore do not classify "media art" as a separate category in my personal files, but rather attach the single pieces within their technological context, such as Carsten Nicolai's sonifications of electricity under "oscilloscope". "Sonic" delay lines were developed for short-time storage in early digital computers (Turing's ACE) first, before this hybrid technology was re-discovered in Yun-Chul Kim's media art installation *Hello World!* (once presented at Ars Electronica in Linz, having been developed at the Academy of Media Arts, Cologne). And Paul de Marinis' artistic re-invention of archaic forms of phonographic sonification has been anticipated by Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville's "Phonautograph" in the 1860s - as if the archive of media-archaeological artefacts with its therein embedded implicit knowledge is always already one step in advance of media art as anamnesis of these layers.<sup>5</sup>

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3 A reminder I owe to Bernhard Siegert; see his contribution to: TRANSIT Innsbruck (Hrsg.), *On the Air. Kunst im öffentlichen Raum*, Redaktion: Heidi Grundmann / Nicila Mayr, Vienna 1993

4 Combining the printed report with the option of listening to the voice (by activating the sound file) is the Internet platform. See *Spiegel online*: "Tonaufnahmen vom Reichskanzler", [http://einestages.spiegel.de/static/topicalbumbackground/24306/so\\_klang\\_bismarck.html](http://einestages.spiegel.de/static/topicalbumbackground/24306/so_klang_bismarck.html)

5 See Anthony Moore, *Transactional Fluctuations 2. "Reflections on Sound"*, in: Siegfried Zielinski / Eckhard Frülus

## **In/compatible media tempor(e)alities**

Media archaeology - in agreement with Siegfried Zielinski's approach - on the one hand is providing a deep temporal dimension to current media practices. But this deep temporal dimension is not necessarily of a historical kind - which is the meaning of artistic critique of the concept of media history.

The *arché* in "archeology" is not primarily about origins in the past, but about dis-covering principles, the rules that govern media operativity both as hard- and as software, as commandment (in the Derridean sense<sup>6</sup>). Archaeology as the "beginning" of our techno-condition is an active command, execution in the software sense, of orders, procedures, patterns and routines. Thus media archaeology is the analytic reduction of complex techno-mathematics to the essentials. To take an example: the current return to Assembly programming language which is close to the machine; here mathematical operations become material.

Gregory Barsamian's media art installation *The Scream* (1988), presented in the exhibition *Vom Funken zum Pixel* (October 2007 until January 2008, Martin-Gropius-Bau Berlin, curated by Richard Catelli), is inspired by early animation techniques previous to the intention of cinematography proper (such as the Zoetrope or the Phenakistoscope) and at the same time in its material installation is a reminder of the difference to pixel-based moving images.

Another example is the long-time ("Bergsonian") photographic exposure of theatre performances by Aljoscha Begrich, Lucas Fester and Jo Preußler, exhibited under the title of *Flüchtige Totale* in the Deutsches Theater, Berlin, April 2005.

The *In/compatible transmediale.12* symposium deals with voluntary or involuntary break-downs and disconnections, reversals and heterogeneities of media culture in order to re-articulate and explore "new forms of transversal materiality and temporality" (Exposé).

Indeed, "Precedents for our own digital concerns might be found in technologies as recent as 30 or 100 years ago" (the announcement of professor Rabinovitz' faculty research seminar *The Usable Past: Historical Perspectives on Digital Culture* (summer term 2000 at The University of Iowa, Obermann Center for Advanced Studies). But this is exactly the kind of historical analogism which as a media archaeologist I feel obliged to oppose to, since it is exactly the discontinuity between the classical and the digital media age which has, scientifically and aesthetically, to be confronted and to be cognitively trained. The model of "historical precedents" privileges already a sense of linear continuity, while our culture has to adjust to the radical rupture which the digital logic introduces to our traditional media culture.

To re-phrase Jussi Parikka's reading of my version of media

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(eds), *Variology 4. On Deep Time Relations of Arts, Sciences and Technologies in the Arabic-Islamic World and Beyond*, Cologne (Walther König) 2010, 289-304 (289f)

6 See Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'Archive*, Paris 1995

archaeology, media archaeology is counter-historical. It is not necessarily about contextual information about past media, but creating such situations where you get into direct contact with media in its radical operability and temporality. Technologies in this sense are time-machines. Media-archaeological research is branded not by a historian's interpretative interest but by sharing the techno-mathematical situation in its non-historical presentness. This applies to archives and machines as well: "Their functioning operations are the media archaeological moment that is at its core un-historical."<sup>7</sup>

Media archaeology is an exact method, not about semantics and semiotics but leaning towards our techno-mathematical condition. The only way to understand digital media, or technical media more generally, is to understand how it puts physics and mathematics into operation, makes formulas into commands, and how engineering creates so many functions that we mistake as human.

"Media archaeology is processual, it focuses on the time-critical processes which engineer our lives" <Parikka *ibid.*> and thus can dedicate itself to opening up technologies in an artistic vein - even if examples of such media archaeological arts are actually less about artists working with historical material than about hardware hacking, open software and circuit bending. Media archaeology is hence also about microtemporal processes. An example on such media artistic practices is the *Microresearch lab* in Berlin.

Still we do not relegate media archaeology to the sciences faculties but want to keep it within humanities, because this method is most of all interested in the epistemological conditions in which the commands, executions and operations take place. This points towards the micro-political contexts of media archaeology which is hidden in the physical and logical layers of media machines and need to be articulated radically. Academic media archaeology then has a special responsibility to open up systems (black boxes). In that sense, media archaeology has some connection with platform and software studies<sup>8</sup>, revealing the double-nature of such studies between the cultural interface and the computational heart the beat of which is essentially processual.

Machines are agents of cultural time. They record, process, transmit "and do not always ask for permission from the human being" <Parikka *ibid.*>. Media-archaeological research is performed by artists, academics, and foremost: by machines themselves.

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<sup>7</sup> Jussi Parikka, *Cartographies of Media Archaeology*, entry November 22, 2009 ("Professor Ernst's take on media archaeology"), <http://mediacartographies.blogspot.com>

<sup>8</sup> See Ian Bogost / Nick Montfort, *Platform Studies. Frequently Questioned Answers*, in the *online journal: Digital Arts and Culture*, December 12-16, 2009